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MUSEUMS OF ART

BY MRS. SCHUYLER VAN RENSSELAER

“Too big! Too big!” So exclaims a friend of mine, an intelligent friend, when I boast of something newly acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art. “The place is much too large. We should be far better off if we had several small museums instead of such a big one.”

“Why?” I need not repeat the answer in detail. Physical fatigue, mental confusion, inability to find what one wants to see, eventual vexation and discouragement—dwelling upon trials such as these, many other intelligent people deplore the size of the Metropolitan. Intelligent, I repeat, to point the fact that they are of a kind that ought not to be unintelligent in this matter. They have not thought about it. They have thought only of their own personal pleasure in visiting a museum. They should think with a broader sympathy. They should think as they already do about public libraries. They do not declare that the New York Public Library, or any other, is “too big”.

But, you may say, the Metropolitan is what it is—a great general museum of the arts. It is big and it will stay big and grow bigger. Why dwell, then, upon a merely academic question? It is not academic; it is a living and an important question. It is very important that the public should be satisfied with its museums and the way they are managed, should understand what they are meant to be and how they may best be used and enjoyed. It is important also that possible givers should not be tempted to fancy that any museum needs no more gifts. And it is important that the citizens of other American towns, so apt to look to New York for examples to follow or avoid, should not be misled.

A surprisingly large number of museums of art have been founded in this country in recent years, foreshadowing, of course, many more to follow. No general rules can be laid down as to

how they may rightly be started: the problem ought in each case to be studied afresh with an eye to the size of the town, its resources, the character of its population, and its nearness to other towns which already possess museums of art. But I may at least try to explain why no great and wealthy city need hesitate to plan for collections which will grow into a great and varied museum; why, in fact, such a museum will serve such a city better than could a number of small ones each devoted to certain branches or periods of art.

The first reason is the lesser cost of a single large than of several small museums. In respect to sites and buildings this may easily be understood. But the public does not understand the great expense of running a museum properly or the difficulty of getting money for the purpose. He who gives or bequeaths money for the purchase of works of art can see with his mind's eye concrete results, and among them those little labels affixed to the objects bought with his "fund" which will keep his name agreeably alive. But he who gives for maintenance, or gives without restrictions knowing that his money will probably be used for maintenance, does so out of pure unselfish love for his fellow-citizens. Therefore his gifts are rarer. Despite the aid it gets from the city, the Metropolitan is so short of money for running expenses that year by year a large deficit must be met from funds which should if possible be used for purchases, and from the pockets of its trustees.

Such troubles would be still greater were there several museums instead of one. With segregated collections there would be no need, perhaps, for any large increase in the number of officials and employees of certain kinds; but of other kinds, beginning with the Director himself, as many would be required in each small museum as in a great one. So it may be said of other costs as well as of salaries—for example, of the expense of maintaining the necessary photographic ateliers and repair shops. Moreover, a single reservoir of money that may be used for purchases as occasion prompts can do the public better service than several small funds each confined to a limited class of objects.

But pecuniary arguments are in this matter merely the beginning of wisdom. There are also questions of supervision and management. Even in a city as large as New York it is hard to

get the right number of persons of the right kind to give without recompense their time and thought as trustees of a museum. To multiply such boards would inevitably decrease efficiency; and to think that a single board might supervise several museums situated in different parts of the city shows little knowledge of what such work would mean. Again, it is hard to find as yet properly accomplished museum directors and curators. Often they must largely train themselves for their work after it begins, and it is well for them if they can have the help of association with many colleagues.

Most important to consider, however, are the needs and desires of the frequenters of a museum. Broadly speaking, these fall into five classes: serious students, professional or amateur, of art and the history of art; lovers of art who do not care or have not the time to study it; sight-seers; school children; and persons practically concerned with the applied arts.

The serious student is not likely to complain of the size of a museum—of the multiplicity of its collections or of the extent of any one of them. He knows that the arts of one time and country cannot be understood without some knowledge of those of other times and lands; or, if he is working in a different fashion, he knows that one branch of art cannot be intelligently examined in its parallel and consecutive manifestations without some knowledge of the development of other branches. He knows that in either case, in any case, *comparison* must be the basis of study, the touchstone of judgment. And the nearer together he finds the various objects that he must consider, the lighter his labors will be, not only lighter in the physical sense but easier intellectually. He will be thankful that he does not have to wait till another day and go to the other end of the city to make comparisons; and the more objects of any kind he can observe, the better right he will have to feel sure of his conclusions. Of course he will complain if he finds a professedly rich collection “stuffed” with inferior material, but if the material be good he can hardly have too much of it.

As it is with the collections, so it is with their necessary or desirable adjuncts—the photographs and casts that may supplement and the books that may elucidate them. Necessary indeed

are the books. The library of a museum of art is not a bibliophile's collection of rare or beautiful volumes. Such volumes it may contain, but its purpose is to supply books which, whether beautiful or not, facilitate the study of the arts. Very large it may be, for the possible books are many. Large it must be, for it must serve not only the public but first of all the curators of the museum, and their needs are wide. Their work is not simply to watch the market, find things for the trustees to buy, arrange the galleries attractively, and keep their contents in good condition. They must *know* about the things that they wish to buy and that living or dead people wish to give them, and also they must impart of their knowledge to the public. They must compile catalogues, handbooks, and bulletins and write labels, and when this is done as copiously and instructively as it is at the Metropolitan it means much knowledge of an accurate kind, much research carried, very often, into fields of art with which the object in view may seem to have little relation. And what the curators must know, other students will wish to know. Could we hope, therefore, to have a really good library in each of our imagined small museums? Would it be worth while thus to spend the money that would be needed for duplication and reduplication? Or should the books be segregated to match, so to say, the segregated collections? Would this, indeed, be possible without, again, much reduplication? In certain books, of course, the subject-matter is distinctly and more or less narrowly limited. But even upon these, as I have implied, the student of some other phase of art will often wish to call, and many costly books and voluminous periodicals deal with many branches or periods of art. No—we shall do all that even a city like New York can hope to do if we build up a single reference library such as a museum of art should contain.

When the lover of art who is not a student deserves his name, when he takes true delight in the interesting and beautiful works of the human hand, he should have no quarrel with a museum on account of its size. If it is strange to him he may lose his way, but he can hardly lose his time. Or, if he wants especially to pasture his eye in some particular field, surely he should have intelligence enough to ask his way and to pursue it until he reaches his objec-

tive, no matter how many green fields and flowery copses open seductively from his path. And in either case he should have intelligence enough to be satisfied with what he can see within the limits of his time and strength. That under the same roof there is much else to see—why should this annoy him any more than it would to know that there are other things in other buildings or in other towns?

But too often the professed lover of art is merely a sight-seer, and quantity is the test of a sight-seer's satisfaction. Curiosity, not true interest, is his motive power. If he has "missed" anything the fact that he has seen a great deal does not console him. He does not wish really to see the things in a museum, to appraise them, enjoy them, and put them away in his mind for remembrance. He wants to "see the museum", to find out what it contains. To leave some parts of it unseen afflicts him as it would to leave a theatre before the last act. Especially if he comes from afar he wants to go home with the feeling that he has "seen the Metropolitan"; and if he has not seen the whole of it he is likely, whether he comes from afar or lives close at hand, to protest in explanation, "Of course it is much too big." It is from him, from the sight-seer who may or may not think himself a lover of art, that come the complaints about the undue size of a museum.

There must be many true lovers and real students of art in New York who have never seen everything in the Metropolitan and are content that so it should be. Interested in certain things, they look at these as often as they can and contentedly let other things wait for ampler hours—or let them go. It may seem odd that even a sight-seer cannot do the same, and odd that he would not feel so discontented were there several small museums instead of one large one and he had not visited them all. But this is a fact, for it is a fact that, although there are other places in New York besides the Metropolitan where fine works of art may be seen, the sight-seer seldom laments his ignorance of them. And his frame of mind is not odd; it is merely illogical.

As for our school children they are, with a difference, in the same case as the serious student. Although their needs are very different their immediate wants are the same. They too are best

served by many collections gathered together under a single roof. Of course they cannot yet really study or really appreciate works of art, but they can learn something about them and form fruitful habits of mind and eye and hand. And it is by no means only to learn about the arts as such that we are now taking our children to museums. At last we are discovering that the arts have not been developments set apart and aloft beyond the horizon of the common man but have been part and parcel of the growth of the nations. We are learning to see, in addition to their prime value as creators of beauty, their indispensable value as illustrators of human life, as interpreters of the customs, the belongings, the deeds, beliefs, ideas, and ideals of the people who produced them. And so we are learning to utilize their products not only as object lessons in the nature of beauty and in the principles of design, and not only as cultivators of good taste, but also as aids to text-books of different kinds—as aids that will both stimulate interest and enlarge knowledge, that will illustrate, accentuate, clarify, vivify what the text-book in history, for example, in geography, in literature, in mythology, endeavors to convey. And how many fields of art one such attempt at illustration may need to traverse! Think, for instance, of a text-book chapter on the Crusades—what a multitude of things may illumine it, from the model of a cathedral and the casts of statues to relics of armor and weapons, jewelry, textiles, utensils, and also the modern pictures in which such things are sometimes more fully represented than by their actual remains. The path of a school class bent upon such a quest may be a long one within the walls of a great museum, but how much longer and more difficult if it led hither and thither from a picture gallery in one part of town to a collection of casts in another part and, elsewhere again, to a museum of Oriental art.

For children who use a museum library the case is again the same. They do use it, some of them, it may be worth while to aver. Recently I sat in the library of the Metropolitan at the same table with two girls of about fourteen who were making notes from manuals of Egyptian archæology. I found them at their task, an hour and a half later I left them at it, and in the meantime they had spoken barely a word to each other and scarcely

raised their eyes from the open books and diligent pencils. Just what they were doing I do not know, but certainly they were doing it seriously. Of course, young students of this kind, who need guidance more than older ones, are best served by a single museum library. Neither they nor their teachers have to wonder where they will find what they want; they know that the Metropolitan is the place. Nor do they have to learn to feel at home in several places amid several groups of librarians and attendants.

Once more: as it is with the children so it is with those among their elders who go to a museum, who are learning to go there in ever-increasing numbers, for help in some branch of industrial or decorative art. Manufacturers of many kinds of things, dealers, salesmen, artisans, designers, illustrators, scene-painters, costumers, actors, "movie" people—the list is long, the needs of those who figure in it are manifold and often cannot be met without wide opportunities to make comparisons. I may add that to both children and working adults museums now offer special study-rooms, "gallery talks", and lectures, all of which, like the lessons of the school-teacher from outside, need to be supplemented by visits to the galleries. We have begun to understand that without what has been called "visual instruction" no verbal instruction in matters of art can be of value, and often the visual instruction demanded by a single lecture or gallery talk must be gathered along many paths.

Not long ago it would have seemed strange enough to bracket together as entitled to consideration in the establishment and the conduct of a museum of art all these differing kinds of possible visitors, from the historian of art and the expert in criticism to the school-child and the maker of neckties or spoons. (I have seen in a department store neckties labelled as made of silks designed from examples in the Metropolitan.) In the old days museums and galleries were thought of as safe repositories for valuable things prized by people already cultivated in this special direction. It was understood that such people would get pleasure and profit from such things. But it was hardly thought that the public at large would greatly concern itself about them, or that anyone would wish to learn about them—or, at all events, that anyone would expect their guardians to aid and supplement, in

the museum itself, such instruction as its contents might in themselves afford. Proper conservation and perfunctory little catalogues, and the guardians' duty was done. But a time came when the museum wished and hoped to attract the general public, and now it feels that it must also instruct the public while serving the scholar and continuing to give delight to the connoisseur. Not long ago one of the administrators of an American museum told me that when he began his work all that he cared to consider, all that he thought worth considering, was the approval and the benefit of other scholars. To-day he is one of those who know best how to attract and to teach the public. "No museum," said recently another such official, "now has a right to ask to be supported by the city or the public unless it works for its living."

Of course it is not to be understood that in a museum size should be first considered, quantity and variety exalted above quality. From every point of view a few fine things, even though they represent a narrow field of art, are preferable to many poor ones. And the larger a museum grows, the higher the standard of quality should be set. Things that the Metropolitan might rightly have accepted when it was small and poor it may now with a clear conscience refuse. In certain directions, indeed, it should now look only for masterpieces, leaving all else for newer, needier institutions.

Nor should it be thought that there is no honorable, useful place in the world for a small museum excepting in a small town where, if it is rightly planned and managed, the people may be as well content with it as with their small public library. A city with the largest predicable museum will always have place for small collections that are good of their kind, and of certain kinds it will always have need. A school of design like Cooper Union needs its own illustrative collections and its own explanatory books just as a law school needs its own library. To take a very different example, it is as important that Spanish art as that Spanish literature should be represented in the rooms of the Hispanic Society. And to find an example of still another sort we may look at the Egyptian treasures owned by the New York Historical Society. A few years ago those who tried to make acquaintance with them could hardly bear the thought that they

had to stay where they were. Slowly, or not so slowly, many of them were perishing through neglect, and they were quite forgotten by a public never encouraged to visit them. They might almost as well have been reburied in the New World to which they had been brought half a century before. If, we felt, they could be transferred to the Metropolitan they would be rescued, they would be seen, they would be explained, and—many of them very unusual, some of them unique—they would admirably enlarge a treasury already rich and high in favor with the public. But four or five years ago the Historical Society rediscovered them, so to say, and put them in charge of an expert who is gradually saving and reviving them, and so displaying them that they instructively supplement the Metropolitan collection. That is, at the Metropolitan the material is, of course, arranged in chronological order, all the various things of the same period grouped together. But at the Historical Society, most wisely in view of the amount and the character of the material, the grouping is not according to periods but according to kinds. Thus anyone, who at the Metropolitan has familiarized himself with periods, sequences, successive styles, will here be able to study advantageously this or that kind of object as in divers periods it may have been produced. There is still room for a difference of opinion. Still it may be felt that these treasures might better have been added to those in the great museum. Yet no one can question the interest or the value of the smaller collection as it will be when its arrangement is completed and, we may hope, proper galleries for displaying it are built.

Different from any of these is the private collection that has passed into public keeping—a collection of pictures, it may be, or, like the Altman collection, of pictures and other beautiful things. Many grieved, very naturally grieved, when the Altman collection was moved to the Metropolitan from the well arranged and delightful galleries where it had been assembled. And everyone, I think, is content that the Frick collection should stay where it is. For, despite all that may most truthfully be said about the prime need for a great and widely hospitable museum, about the need for study, for instruction, for the opportunity to make comparisons, we also need sometimes to enjoy the mere passive contem-

plation of beautiful things, and for this a small collection, if harmoniously composed, gives the better chance. But, let us remember, the Frick collection, all of our small collections and any that we may hereafter acquire, would be far less valuable were not the Metropolitan at hand to help us to learn how to enjoy them.

And it should also be remembered, especially by intending benefactors, that there is one place where a small collection, whether of pictures or of varied things, has no right to exist. It has no right to exist inside a large museum. Here all the things ought to be incorporated with the main collections, distributed in accordance with the general scheme of arrangement. Of course a public which does not thoroughly understand such matters might well blame a museum for refusing fine things even when offered under hampering conditions. A donor who is its real friend will not put it to so severe a test.

There is still another argument in favor of large museums. More limited collections, unless they serve actual working places like Cooper Union, are always in danger of dying. A great museum ought to "work for its living" but a small one must in some way work to keep itself alive. A great museum ought to justify its demand for public support by doing its best to inform the intelligence, cultivate the eye, and improve the taste of the people, but its mere size, the multitude and variety of its contents, will keep it in the public mind. The mere fact that we find it difficult to see everything it owns, added to the fact that, like a river draining a wide watershed, its riches constantly increase, brings us back to it again and again. But small museums, which are usually like lakes that remain at the same level, incur the danger that familiarity breeds. They are likely to decline from places of living interest into morgues or mausoleums, such as were for many years the galleries of the Historical Society—not only those that contained its Egyptian treasures but those that were filled with interesting and valuable pictures. It is not alone in our restless immature America that this may happen. We can all remember in European cities small collections of very beautiful things which virtually no one visits except the passing tourist. Nor is it only the sight-seer who craves the charm and stimulus of novelty. So does the student or the true lover of the arts.

Besides his cultivated bodily eye he has a cultivated mental eye which sees very clearly such things as he has taken pains to hang in the chambers of his memory. What he has often seen he carries with him wherever he goes. Of course he likes to see it again and again with his bodily vision, but he wants still more to see new things, for this means not only an hour of fresh delight but also a growth in knowledge and the enrichment of his permanent mental treasury. The true amateur of beauty as well as the simple sight-seer makes a special effort to visit the museum where new acquisitions of kinds that appeal to him are put on view or a loan collection of them has been gathered. Even the largest museum ought in this way to excite an interest which will stimulate and develop interest in the museum as a whole, in its familiar as well as its novel possessions. I need hardly say that it is much more difficult for a small museum, which most often has no money to spend except upon mere maintenance, to vivify public interest either by the proffer of new things to see or by explanatory instruction. And the more narrowly specialized it is, the harder is the task.

I want especially to emphasize this point—that the desire to see new as well as familiar works of art is no more a sign of superficiality or stupidity or apathy than the desire to read books one has not read before. The more we care for the Rembrandts or the Titians that we have seen, the keener we are to look upon others. When a lover of Rembrandt sees for the first time the great landscape that Mr. Widener owns, or a lover of early Italian painting the splendid Bellini that Mr. Hamilton lent not long ago to the Metropolitan, it is an epoch in the history of his high pleasures, just as would be to a lover of literature or music his acquaintance with a hitherto unknown poem by Milton or a newly discovered Beethoven symphony.

It is a great part of the duty of a museum to gratify such right and reasonable, natural, laudable desires by borrowing as well as by purchasing or by accepting gifts, and this duty may well include the temporary exhibition of the work of living artists who have been much talked about even though they may hardly have the right to expect a welcome as permanent residents in the museum.

Many people who do not understand that a museum wants and even needs to borrow good things are bashful about proffering them when they wish to make safe disposal of their treasures for a time. They feel that they are asking a favor, perhaps too great a favor. Really, if their things are fine, they are conferring a favor on the public and on the museum as its intermediary. The business of a museum is to show the public beautiful or interesting works of art. If it can show them in perpetuity, so much the better; if it can show them for a time, this also is well. Circumstances may, of course, prevent the acceptance of even a very tempting offer. For example, I have known a museum to decline regretfully the loan of a pair of small mediæval stained glass windows because it would have been unwise to make openings in the outer wall of the building for the display of temporary possessions. But in general a museum is glad to borrow good things whether a loan collection is in prospect or not. In fact, such things are especially welcome when they can be placed where they rightly belong—among other objects of a similar kind. More and more this matter of grouping, of the close association of kindred things, is seen to be important. It was an innovation but an admirable one when a couple of years ago the Metropolitan, assembling a remarkably fine loan collection to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of its own birth, did not keep the things together but distributed them through many galleries, each borrowed object being placed with its fellows but labelled as a transient possession.

It cannot be too often said that the modern, or at all events the American, museum of art now feels that its duty is to serve the public in every possible way. The more use that people make of it for the benefit of the public or of an individual, the better its guardians will be pleased. And the better the people will love it, and the more convinced they will become that, while small collections are desirable and sometimes are necessary, the chief need of a great city is for a great and diversified, an ever-growing and ever-active treasury of the arts.

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